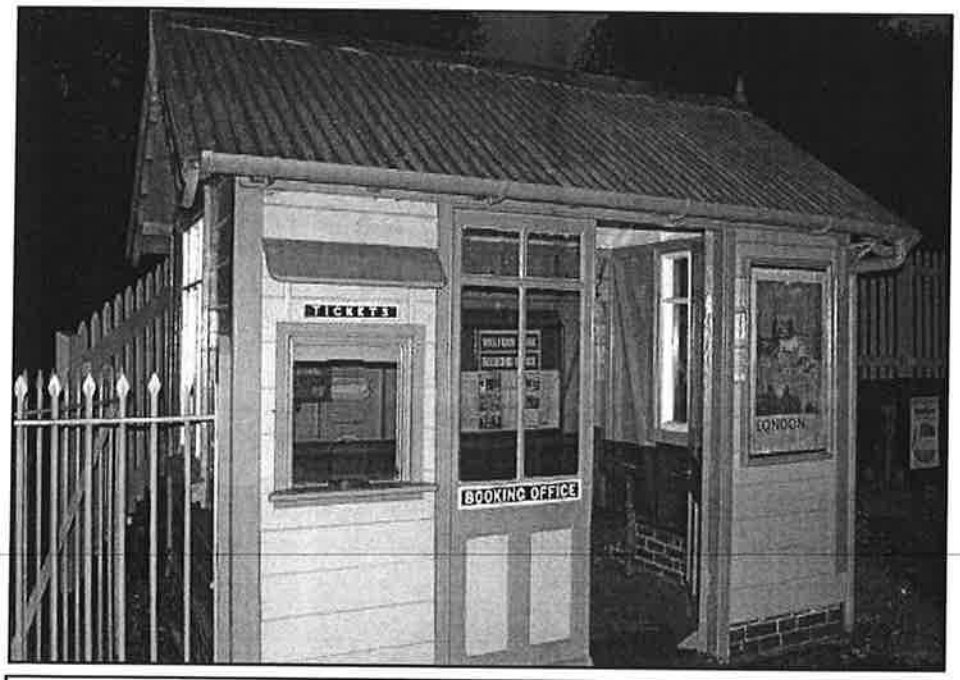
# Britain's Railways at War

*Tony Blackburn, probably RMARG's most avid 'Chuff- Chuff' merchant, waxes lyrical over a recent group event, which prompted a session of delving into wartime activities, both 'on the line' and 'in the sheds'.*

Although the group always tries to make meetings interesting, the August RMARG meeting was especially unique. Held at the Railway Centre in Didcot, it proved hugely popular with the 40 or more members and guests that went along, and we must thank Pat & Ellen for organising the visit and refreshments. Unfortunately, as the evening progressed it became more chilly and wet. Despite this, and perhaps because there's a little bit of fascination for steam in all of us, the weather seemed not to lessen enthusiasm. The sheer scale of engines and rolling stock when viewed from ground level rarely ceases to amaze, more so when they are part dismantled and the components can be examined in isolation. Our guides for the evening, Peter Lugg & Dick Tolley, were extremely well informed, as was Frank Dumbleton manning the relics display. Try as we might, none of us was able to stump them, and we were treated to all manner of snippets of railway engineering details.




*The Welford Park station's ticket office and waiting room, rescued from destruction, now refurbished and displayed at Didcot along with part of the platform and picket fence. [Photo, in the gathering gloom, by Helen Cripps]*

Although time constraints precluded much emphasis on the subject of railways at war, it was fascinating to inspect Loco No 5322 in military Railway Operating Division colours, and amazing to think that 'she' first saw active service in France during the First World War. The air raid shelter, with sirens, bomb reverberations, radio recordings and background noises brought back eerie memories to those who witnessed such things for real. A thoroughly entertaining evening.

One of the rescue efforts of the rail enthusiasts rather coincidentally involved the removal and restoration of major structures from the former station at Welford Park, on the Lambourn branch line - right in RMARG's

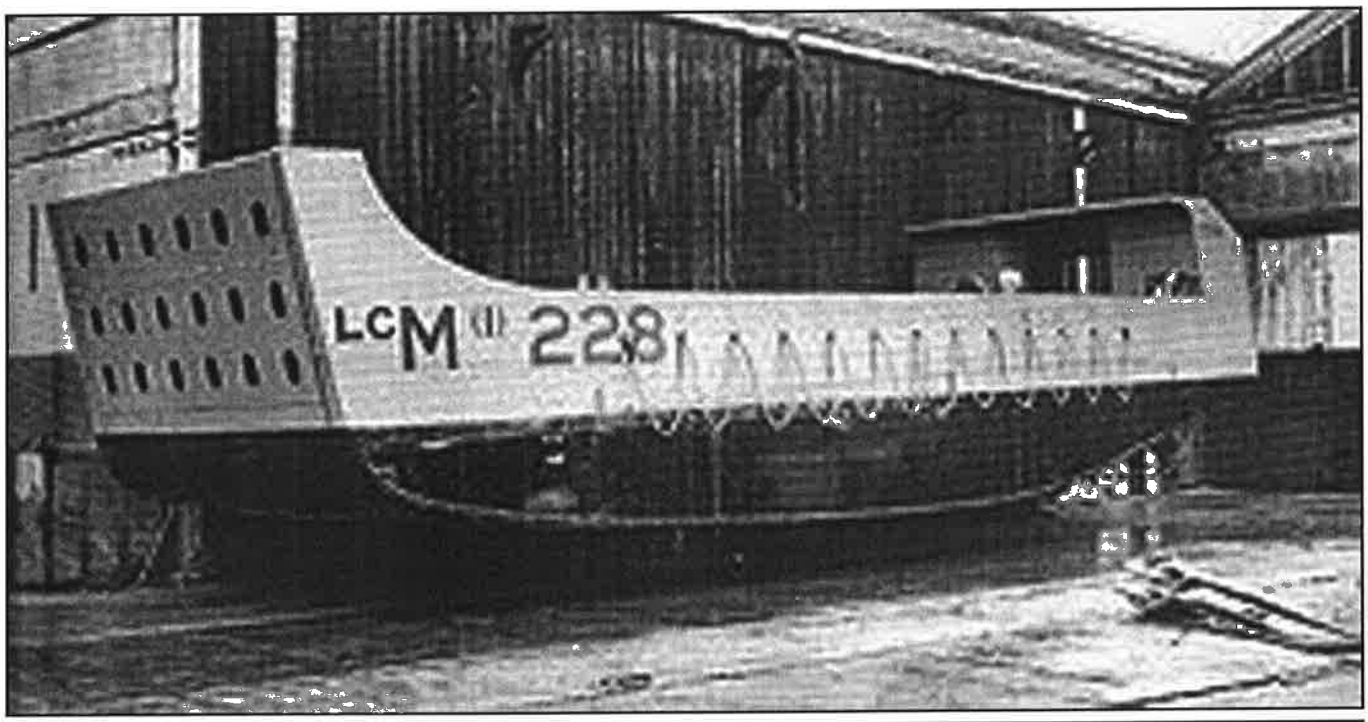
backyard, so to speak. The station sign, ticket office and part of the platform are now laid out in pristine livery at the centre. Of course, this was of great interest to RMARG members, and there is a possibility that a copy of their rescue story will soon be lodged in the group archive.The visit prompted an investigation of the war work carried out by the railways and their engineering works, which manufactured an impressive quantity and range of products despite having to endure great hardships along the way.

As well as being an important junction, Didcot was, of course, a hugely important marshalling area for military supplies, and included in excess of 15 miles of sidings. In the run-up to D-Day, planners recognised the importance of the Didcot – Southampton line. Much of the track was doubled, with stations and passing places extended to allow the increased number of large freight trains to pass one another. The US Army Corps of Engineers undertook much of this vital engineering work. Incidentally, hundreds of standard locomotives were shipped across the Atlantic from USA to help the war effort in Europe and North Africa.

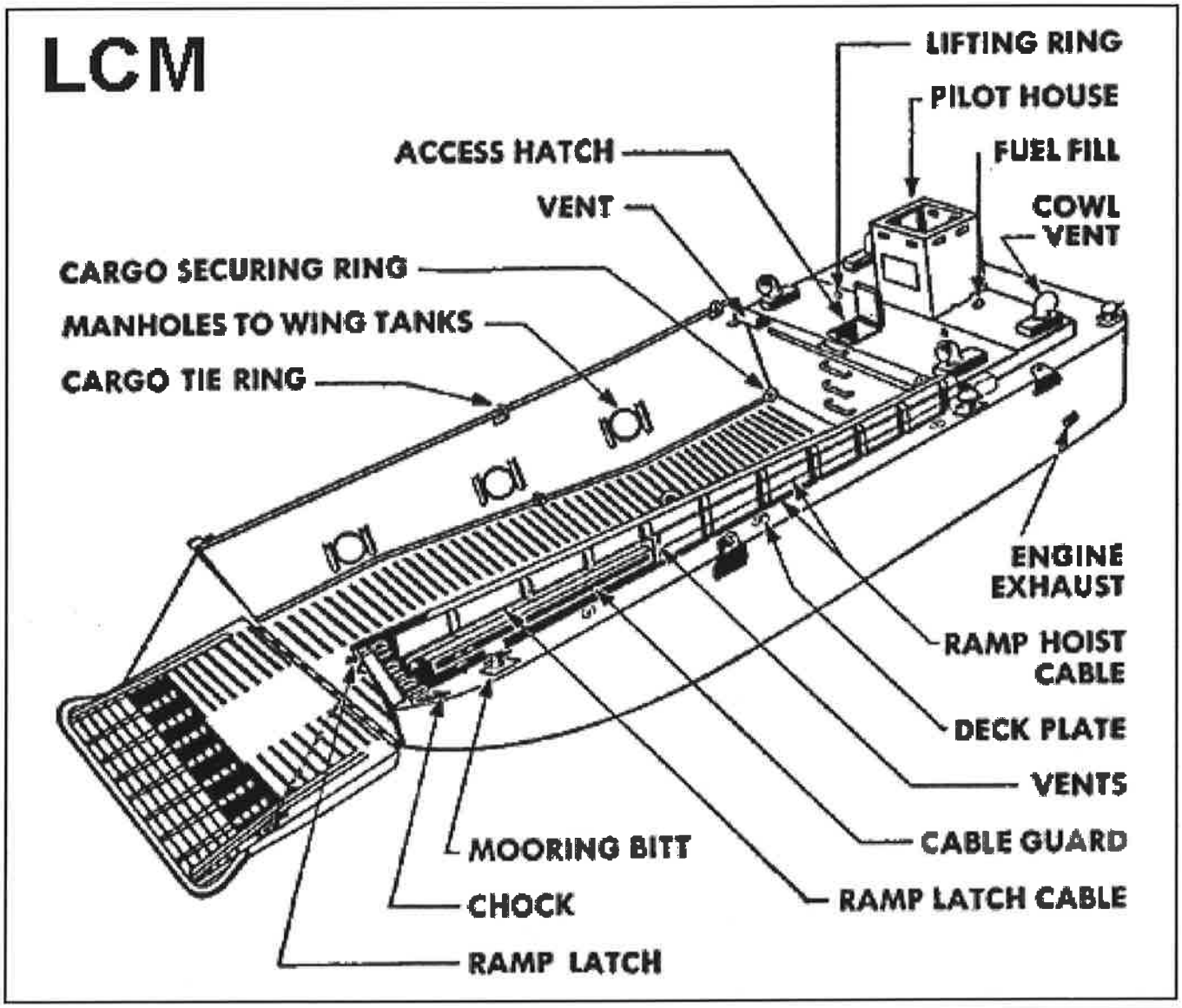
The Great Western Railways' Swindon works was already massive, with a broad range of design and manufacturing skills, and all four main British railway companies temporarily abandoned their attitude of isolation, and liaised daily to make best use of their talents. There was much interchange of rolling stock, and, for the first time, the separate companies tried to standardise designs and operating procedures. During the early years of war, the railways carried more than 750,000 evacuees on additional trains, and transported the 338,000 troops brought back from Dunkirk to towns and cities throughout Britain.

There weren't many engineering tasks that the Swindon Works could not put its collective hand to. It is widely understood, for instance, that the huge steel drums on which the Pluto pipeline was coiled were made there. As early as 1940, GWR workers began turning out bombs up to 4,000lbs in weight, as well as artillery shells by the thousand, and a variety of components in vast quantities for aircraft, tanks, armoured cars and other military vehicles. Machines designed for turning steel locomotive 'tyres' were found ideal for machining tank turret mountings. Midget submarines, searchlight units, generators and milled parts for other military hardware were produced on demand. Wagon-mounted large bore hyper-velocity guns were developed that in the event were never used to bombard the French coast from Dover. Quick-release gear for barrage balloons was another speciality, and more that 27,000 sets of parts for Bailey bridges were produced. A number of the D-Day landing craft, based on the Higgins design, were built at Swindon. Ironically, these craft were too large to be carried on railway wagons and had to be transported by road to harbours along the South coast.

Just prior to the war, in 1938, the small landing strip at South Marston had been earmarked for use as an aircraft 'shadow' factory, to capitalise on the expertise




*An LCM3 (Landing Craft, Mechanised, Mk 3) awaits collection outside No 13 shed at GWR Works Swindon in 1943.*




*There were many variations on the basic 25-ton LCM shown here. With two 0.5"machine guns and armour, these vessels carried 60 troops or a 30-ton tank.*

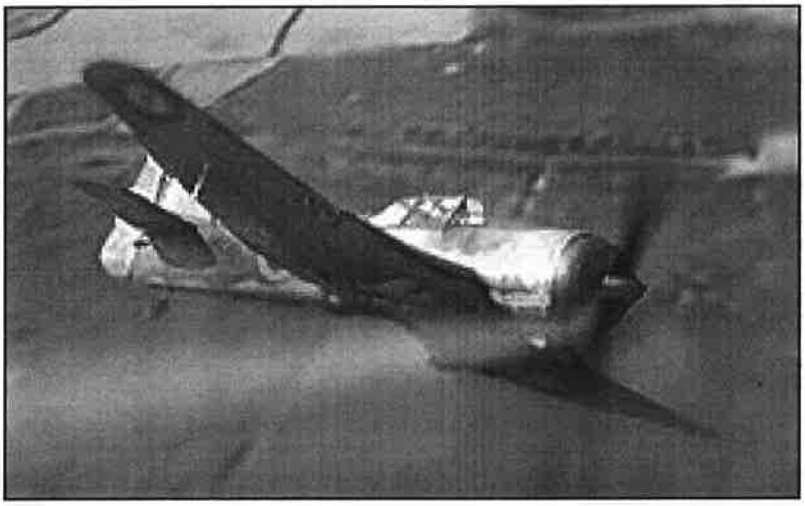
available in the nearby GWR Carriage and Wagon works for the construction of wooden aircraft parts. Very soon, the factory began producing complete Miles Master training planes, and later on, Short Stirling bombers as well. It was planned to produce the Avro Lancaster at South Marston, but in the event, the factory took on production of late versions of the Spitfire, and modifications to earlier Marks.

Woodworkers from the GWR Coach & Wagon Works were put to work, not on producing powered aircraft, but on assembling hundreds of Horsa and Hamilcar gliders at the nearby airfields of Wroughton and Lyneham.

To visit Steam, the GWR museum in Swindon, is to be left in no doubt of the huge part played by the 'gentle sex' in this tremendous effort. Women were quickly involved in machining, welding and riveting at the works, but it did not stop there. Before long, women began to tackle engine cleaning, signal operations and track laying, and by war's end there were few jobs not being tackled by women as well as men.

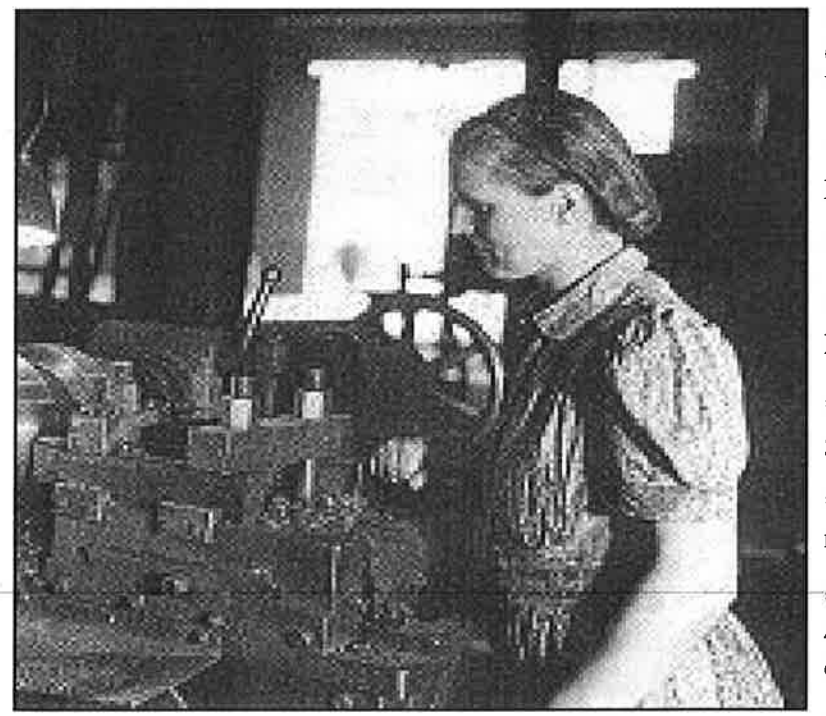
Despite their exemption from military call-up, many men from the railway works 'joined up' and others manned the separate factory Home Guard and Civil Defence units, and the manning of Bofors anti-aircraft guns added to the burgeoning daily workload.

As elsewhere, there were instances of staff participating in rescue work above and beyond the call of duty, demonstrating extreme selflessness by members of these organisations. It was recorded that one railwayman rescued a number of company horses from a fire despite being fully aware that his own home was



*South Marston shadow factory produced over 2,000 of the Miles Master on which innumerable fighter pilots fine-tuned their skills.*

*A newly completed Horsa glider at Wroughton in 1943*



*Don't you know there's war on? A female machinist at GWR Swindon.*

ablaze!
On top of all this was the on-going task of repairing bomb-damaged track, locomotives, stations and bridges, while meeting the demand for increased traffic, irrespective of losses in personnel and facilities. A single thousand-bomber raid, for example, required the delivery of 650 tanker wagons of aviation fuel from refineries and ports to airfields in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. In the 3 weeks immediately prior to D-day, almost 10,000 additional train movements took place, without major disruption of scheduled services.

Many train drivers and other railwaymen were killed or injured in bombing raids during the blitz, but the greatest number of casualties occurred during one 10-week period of 1944, when 54 railwaymen and women were killed and 1282 were injured as a result of V-1 flying bombs.

One can only be awed at the ingenuity and tenacity shown by railway staff and operators, much of which can be sensed at Didcot to this day.

Appendix: Statistics of GWR Engineering Works War Production

* 12,500 armoured car turret rings.

* Sundry parts for Cavalier, Centaur, Churchill, Cromwell, Comet, Crusader, Valentine, and Matilda tanks.

* 250 clutches & 320 final drives for multiple Pom-Pom guns.

* 400 6-pdr naval gun mountings.

* Design & construction of rail-mounted, hyper-velocity 13.5 " cross-channel gun.

* 1850 axles and limber parts for 25pdr field guns.

* 21,865 quick-release mechanisms for barrage balloons.

* Design and modification of 2,000lb & 4,000 lb bomb cases (completed within 3 days of request).

* Thousands of 2,000lb ("Goebbels") & 4,000lb ("Goering") bombs.

* 3,000 single & 600 twin Hotchkiss gun

shields for shipboard use.

* 27,157 timber components & 13,700 packing components for transporting Bailey bridges.

* 34 3-ton quayside cranes.

* 50 2-man midget submarine superstructures, and a complete training midget sub.

* 13,000 nose pressings for 4,000lb bomb fuses.

* 60,000 trench mortar bombs.

* 65,000 machined 25-pdr shells.

* 447,000 copper shell bands.

Unfortunately, the product list of those involved in glider building is not contained in the GWR records.


*GWR military exemption badge. Many railwaymen refused this 'privilege' and served with distinction in the armed forces.*

# "My Visitor" George Robey

Christmas 1941. I started work at a garage in Wantage, and was quickly transferred to its other establishment at Rowstock, on the old A34, where I found a fitter in residence, and a small amount of work.

On the first morning, a motor cyclist turned up, chatted for a while with the fitter, had a hot drink, and then was off on his way. This happened a couple of times a week over the next month or so while I was working at this garage. I missed seeing this motorcycle the first time, and the next time it came, it was equipped with a sidecar, similar to those used by the AA. This type of sidecar was made of wood, and was not intended to carry passengers. This particular 'outfit' carried a RN number plate.

The following week when he appeared, the rider opened his weatherproof jacket to reveal a Navy uniform. He disclosed that he was a seaman MT driver. By this time he was happy to pass the time of day with me, a mere boy of 14. I found out that his trip was from Portsmouth to a place called Bletchley. When I asked to see inside his sidecar, I discovered that it was full of radio valves.

The word park was not mentioned, but since the book on code breakers has been published and some of the secrets of Enigma have been revealed, I often wonder if 'our' motorcyclist was somehow involved in that top-secret activity.

**Continues Page 13**